



**State of Wisconsin**  
**Department of Public Instruction**  
Elizabeth Burmaster, State Superintendent

---

## THE STATE OF EDUCATION

State Superintendent Elizabeth Burmaster

University of Wisconsin-Madison, Memorial Union

*September 22, 2004*

Thank you, Dave, for that kind introduction.

Thank you to the Sun Prairie High School Jazz Ensemble, under the direction of Steve Sveum. The Sun Prairie community and Superintendent Tim Culver have a lot to be proud of.

And thank you to the excellent staff at the Department of Public Instruction, the CESAs, WASDA, WEAC, WFT, our institutions of higher education, and the many individuals and organizations in this state who support education. I want to thank all of you for the tremendous commitment you demonstrate in serving the children and public schools and libraries of Wisconsin.

Thank you, school district administrators, who have joined us here today for our annual fall conference. As superintendents, it is your job, every day, to bring people together around our shared value of quality education in every Wisconsin community. Thank you for all you do.

I am honored to serve as your elected state superintendent, and it is a privilege to report to the people of Wisconsin on the state of education. Today, I call upon you to look into the eyes of our children and see our future promise. The promise held within the hearts, dreams, and minds of our children.

Throughout our state over the last three and a half years, we have made a New Wisconsin Promise to ensure a quality education for all our children. A New Wisconsin Promise founded upon our state's proud history of educational leadership and innovation. A New Wisconsin Promise that responds to the 2000 *Vincent vs. Voight* Wisconsin Supreme Court decision.

From our country's first kindergarten, to nation-leading performance on college admissions tests, to a truly world-class system of higher education and public libraries, our state has always prided itself on our education system. In Wisconsin, we know the importance of public education and libraries to the economic future of every community. And, in Wisconsin, we recognize the value of our high quality of life sustained by our involved, active citizenry. And, in Wisconsin, we have always had the belief that the days of our children would be better than our own.

Traveling the state from Superior to Beloit—visiting schools, libraries, and community centers; holding listening sessions with community-based organizations; at our rural forums and rural advisory council meetings; at our Milwaukee Alliance for Attendance and truancy task force meetings—I have seen communities engaged in creating successful schools and heard the voices of our citizens, students, parents, and educators.

Wisconsin citizens want to work together. They want to dig out of their deepest problems by re-imagining themselves. In Wisconsin, our citizens truly believe that the best social program is a job, the strongest social institution is the family, and our greatest weapon of mass protection—is education.

Like never before, our state has united on an educational mission: raising the achievement of all students and closing the achievement gap between economically disadvantaged students, students of color, and their peers.

Just look at what—together—we have done in the past three years. Every educator and every school in Wisconsin is working hard on improving student achievement, with a focus on all students reading at or above grade level.

(more)

We have witnessed the percentage of third-, fourth-, and eighth-grade students reading at proficient or advanced continue to grow.

While these results are good news and demonstrate we are moving in the right direction, we need to continue our efforts to educate all our children. Wisconsin has made a promise.

Early childhood education in Wisconsin has been strengthened by our statewide efforts to promote community partnerships. Governor Doyle's *KidsFirst* initiative reflects cross-agency collaboration with the DPI. It is supported and recognized by grants from the Trust for Early Education and the Joyce Foundation to the Wisconsin Council for Children and Families. And schools see the results. Many schools report a decrease in elementary students identified with learning disabilities since implementation of their four-year-old kindergarten program. Investment in quality early learning opportunities pays off in higher achievement. Wisconsin has made a promise.

Starting this school year, 3,500 initial teachers will be certified and licensed under the Wisconsin Quality Educator Initiative, PI 34. Recognized nationally for our high-quality teachers, we are positioned to do even more thanks to collaboration of local school districts, higher education, the unions, professional organizations, and the Department of Public Instruction. Wisconsin has made a promise.

Embracing a spirit of shared responsibility for the education of our children, business and community members across our state have been working with our schools and libraries. Grants establishing community learning centers are increasing parental and community involvement.

Many groups and individuals have rallied to address teenage literacy, health and dental care, and truancy. Nowhere is this hope more alive than in the Milwaukee Alliance for Attendance, which is committed to community-based solutions to keep our students in school. Wisconsin has made a promise.

Our students are active players engaged in their education. Over 40,000 students participate in career and technical student organizations in every part of Wisconsin. High school students benefit from PK-16 partnerships with our technical colleges, private colleges, and university system. Wisconsin has made a promise.

At this conference last year, I announced my "Keeping the Promise" initiative, providing two million dollars for our schools to fund critical and costly special education services. And, this federal discretionary funding will continue for the 2004-05 school year.

It is not enough to make and act on our promise. We must fulfill the promise that we see in the eyes of our children.

Make no mistake. Our education community is committed to closing the achievement gap and increasing the high school, technical, and baccalaureate graduation rate. They are working harder than ever, and they need our help.

Over the past year, I heard from over 250 Milwaukee students who shared their stories of hope and personal struggle in getting to school. I witnessed the difficult educational choices forced on students from small school districts across our state by the revenue caps. I heard the plea of students participating in our WEOP program for more minority precollege scholarship programs. At eight community-based organization listening sessions held across Wisconsin, I heard about what can and must be done working together at the local level. And, during my first visit to a Wisconsin prison, I witnessed the determination of incarcerated graduates as they received their GED diplomas at Jackson Correctional Facility.

As I welcomed educators at back-to-school gatherings in Wauwatosa, Rio, and Beloit just a few weeks ago, my own spirit was invigorated and renewed by the energy and enthusiasm of the new school year. I am always proud of the stories of success that flow from our children and their schools in every part of our state. But, let me be clear. There is more that needs to be done **NOW**. It is up to each generation to take what is good and make it better.

The people of Wisconsin have understood and lived this for over 150 years. We must invest resources to fulfill our New Wisconsin Promise.

In Wisconsin and our nation, we know how to fulfill a promise. Following World War II, we fulfilled our promise to our veterans through education, housing, and economic development programs. For over 60 years, we have fulfilled our promise to provide every senior citizen with an economic safety net through Social Security.

We understand the saying, "A promise made is a promise kept."

We must break through the either/or debates that dominate the public discourse, a discourse of false choices where if you are against TABOR, you must be for unlimited government spending, or if you are for quality childcare and school breakfast programs, well, you must be against family values.

We must rise to a higher ground of public discourse, led by a legislature that understands these are indeed false choices. We cannot choose either/or but must choose both. We need both quality education and fiscal responsibility.

Today, I am submitting to Governor Doyle my proposals for the next biennial budget to fulfill our New Wisconsin Promise to make our state economically competitive and our future prosperous and secure.

Let the debate begin, grounded in an ethic of mutual responsibility for a sound investment in the future and the understanding of our current fiscal situation.

I am submitting a budget that will provide property tax relief through additional state aid and a safety net for schools, with an annual 2.5% increase in general school aids over the next two years, matching the expected increase in the consumer price index.

We must work to help meet the special education needs of our students by increasing special education aid by 74 million dollars, which maintains current reimbursement rates for the first time in four years.

We must fully fund, through state aid beginning in 2005, our *Keeping the Promise* aid program for high-cost special education services. Our schools are cutting back other programs to support these mandated services. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

Wisconsin has a long history of embracing and educating our newest immigrants. We are experiencing a rapid increase in students with limited English proficiency, most recently, with school districts stepping forward to teach our new Hmong residents.

In the last ten years, the number of English Language Learners (ELL) being served has doubled with no increase in funding, and our state reimbursement has fallen to only 12%. I propose increased bilingual-bicultural aid, bringing reimbursement rates back to 30%.

An estimated 26,000 ELL students will be served by our current bilingual-bicultural aid program, but this leaves approximately 14,000 students in 160 school districts who are not eligible for this targeted assistance.

That is why I propose an additional categorical program to provide \$400 per ELL student currently ineligible for reimbursement. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

Upon recommendations from a broad-based rural coalition, I recently announced my *Advancing Rural Wisconsin* initiative to support our rural schools, libraries, and communities. Many rural districts experience declining enrollment, rapidly rising property values, low median income, and large geographic boundaries. These districts need our help.

Recognizing that transportation costs have increased significantly in the last 20 years, I propose the first increase in pupil transportation aid since 1990 and the first program changes since 1981. My proposal would double state pupil transportation aid to virtually all school districts and provide greater levels of reimbursement to nearly 300 school districts that transport students over 12 miles each way. By covering more costs that are currently incurred under revenue limits, districts will have more resources to invest in the classroom.

But, we can and must do more. I call on our state leaders to join me in making a "Rural School Promise" through an aid program based on sparsity. Districts meeting specific criteria in terms of size, student population density, and poverty would receive new categorical aid to be used for locally determined purposes that focus on closing the achievement gap, implementing new teacher mentoring efforts, and studying the collaboration or consolidation of services with other small districts. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

We must look to the real reasons many students are not succeeding academically—the effects of poverty. The poverty rate in Wisconsin has hit a ten-year high. Good health and nutrition affects a student's behavior, attendance, and test scores. Surveys indicate that cost is still a barrier to breakfast participation. I propose to increase our school breakfast aid reimbursement from 10 to 15 cents for voluntary breakfast programs. Further, I call on our state's leaders to create a new grant program so no child of poverty has to pay for breakfast. A hungry child cannot learn.

Since SAGE began in 1996, low-income per-pupil payment has been static at \$2,000, but district matching costs have risen steadily, creating a financial disincentive. We must increase SAGE aid to \$2,500 per eligible low-income pupil. Because poverty has increased, it is time to reopen SAGE to allow a fourth wave of eligible schools to apply. Ask any parent. Small class sizes work to close the gap in achievement.

To support the expansion of four-year-old kindergarten, I propose start-up grants for districts in their initial two years of implementation and incentives to school districts using community approaches.

Common sense and research tell us that the first years of teaching are the most challenging in an educator's professional development. To further enhance our quality teacher efforts, we need to provide our 3,500 initial teachers each year with a mentor. I will submit a request for 2.6 million dollars a year to assist local school districts in developing their mentor programs. Incentives for our veteran educators to pursue Wisconsin master teacher certification, which matches that provided for National Board Certified Teachers, is also included in my budget. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

In Wisconsin, our public libraries have long been centers of our communities and now also provide high-tech free access to information. State funding has fallen to 8.2%, the lowest level in 20 years. Continuing to under fund our public libraries puts at risk our program of library access, resource sharing, and quality services. Our libraries are being used now in more ways by more people than ever before. We must increase to 13% our state level of funding, and support our interlibrary loan operations and BadgerLink. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

Students in every part of our state deserve the opportunity to achieve at the highest levels. Many can pursue apprenticeships, advanced placement, world languages, and distance learning courses, but not all. Through my proposed Advanced Placement grants and expansion of gifted and talented programs, we can enable more schools to add rigorous courses to their curriculum. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

A quality education means challenging opportunities for all our students, no matter where they live. I am submitting proposals for an American Indian initiative, the Wisconsin Career Assessment, and increases in P-5 and precollege programs.

We must pay now for quality education, or we will certainly pay later in social and corrections programs or in a generation of young people unprepared for the high-end jobs of the global economy. We have to pay the price today to secure tomorrow.

We must act now to provide every school district with more budget flexibility and local control under the revenue caps by:

- increasing the low revenue ceiling;
- increasing the unused carryover authority to 100%, so districts no longer have to levy up to their maximum in any given year; and
- changing the declining enrollment exemption to a recurring exemption.

Increasing local flexibility provides citizens and their elected community leaders with the power to do what they think is needed in their schools. This is the foundation of Wisconsin's great schools and our guiding democratic principle.

And, the devoted people who educate our children every day deserve no less than the repeal of the QEO. Wisconsin must fulfill our promise.

For the 2005-07 biennial budget, in total, I am asking for modest increases in school aids of 4% in the first year and 3% in the second year. These essential program proposals and reasonable budget requests will go a long way to ensure that our PK-12 education system maintains excellence and continues to meet the needs of all our children.

The democratic principles that are the foundation of our society and nation require our constant vigilance. Tomorrow, at our second annual Service-Learning and Citizenship Education Conference, we will be honored to hear from Governor Jim Doyle, Justice Ann Walsh Bradley, and many others on the important role of public education in our democracy.

Listen here tomorrow and in our schools across the state to the powerful stories of our students' service-learning projects, of the long-lasting, positive impact of engaging students in their communities. Tomorrow's democratic and economic future rests in the education of every student in our schools today.

Fulfilling the promise lies ahead, in our hands, when each of us contributes to building the political will in our own community to support our education system.

We must build local alliances among PK-16 educators, parents, students, and community, business, and labor leaders in a community agenda where we invest more in our children, reach across our divisions, and build a politics based on lifting up all Wisconsinites, not dividing them against each other.

Give the people of Wisconsin the choice, and they will discover opportunity, demand responsibility, and fulfill the promise, because they recognize we are a community, and we are all in this together.

We must go forward together, or we will all be limited in what we achieve.

Thank you for your commitment to our children and the schools of Wisconsin.